

Cycling the Wall



By Louise Brown

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he girl on the bike in front of me is freewheeling down the road, her arms outstretched like the wings of a bird in flight, her face shows pure delight and love of life. If freedom is a state of mind, Palestine is free. Nima faces many restrictions and obstacles to be able to enjoy this moment, but like many Palestinians I have met, she overcomes them with quiet resilience and strong determination. As a third-generation refugee, she lives in the cramped, violent conditions and poverty of the refugee camp in Nablus. Her parents forbid her from cycling because they believe that cycling affects women's reproductive organs. She cycles every day.

Cycling through the desert.



I arrived in the West Bank on September 22, 2018, with a bike, a tent, and a map. I had thought of many reasons for cycling alone along the 700-kilometer separation wall in Palestine from Badala in the north to the desert in the south: to try to understand the wall and its true effect on the people who live nearby; to see for myself how the restrictions on the basic human right of movement affect everyday life in the West Bank; to counter the media portrayal of the Palestinian people as violent and dangerous; to explore and to feel a country I had fallen in love with from a distance.

A month before leaving Spain, I contacted Cycling Palestine, a cycling group, to ask for advice about my planned route, and we arranged to meet in Ramallah to talk. Our shared love of sport, sense of adventure, openness, and belief in human nature meant that within an hour we became a team and ended up doing the entire ride together. Although I carried my tent the whole way, the Palestinian

culture of warm hospitality meant that Sohaib, a co-founder of Cycling Palestine, found a family in every town who were willing and proud to share their house with a complete stranger. "My friend's house. My friend's house," he would reply to any suggestion of putting up the tent or staying in a guesthouse.

By cycling so close to the wall and thus in an area of heavy military presence, my Palestinian friends were in danger of being strip-searched and detained for the simple act of cycling. However, the Israeli soldiers didn't want to give a bad image of themselves in front of a foreigner and so backed down every time we were stopped when they realized that I was English. At first, I was worried about putting my friends in danger by insisting on following the route, but I soon discovered that, in a way, my presence was allowing them to do what they loved without experiencing the usual problems from the Israeli military. On the second day, we had set off at 7:00 a.m. but got lost, and so at 9:00 p.m., Raed and I were wearily cycling up a long, dark hill that seemed eternal, and we both just wanted to get to our host family and sleep. A huge military vehicle and a police car stopped us, and an Israeli soldier with an AK-47 approached, shouting at me in Arabic. As it was dark and we were wearing "Cycle Palestine" vests, they thought I was Palestinian. When I replied in English, the soldier changed his tone of voice completely and said that he had been sent to check whether we were alright cycling in the dark. Although my British passport made my journey through Palestine a lot easier, I felt embarrassed and angry that I was frequently treated in such a different way from my Palestinian friends simply due to my nationality.



The desert door at Al-Ramadin.



Starting the ride in Badala.



Khan Al-Ahmar Bedouin village.

The act of cycling over the impressively hilly terrain gave me time to process the examples of the injustice that I had heard of and seen during the ride. One family was building a kitchen onto their house when a construction ban was imposed, thus preventing them from completing the roof. The homes of their three sons had all been demolished by the Israelis while their farm overlooks a growing illegal Israeli settlement. Access to quality drinking water is jeopardized due to the frequent water cutoffs by the Israeli authorities. The justification that the wall is a security wall is rendered ridiculous by the huge gap at the Adullam Grove Nature Reserve, which is a popular place among Israeli families. The night we were mistaken for lost, Israeli cyclists and a Palestinian car stopped to help us.

The most emotionally overwhelming moment of the journey was seeing the Palestinian solidarity, support, and peaceful protest to save the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar from demolition. To an outsider like myself, the village is a dusty group of tents where scruffy kids invent toys out of the rubbish lying around. However, I had the privilege to see how and why these nomadic people are treated as a national treasure. On the first day of my bike ride, a Bedouin shepherd welcomed us into his tent, served us tea and water, and explained the local history. He laughed

at me in disbelief when I asked how much we owed him for the drinks. Although they live in such precarious conditions, the Bedouin generosity and hospitality are legendary, and Bedouins have a special place in the heart of the Palestinian people. From all over Palestine, Palestinians and internationals, many of whom represented various NGOs, had come to spend the day at the village to show their support. It was incredible to observe all this energy being invested into what many would see as a group of dusty tents but that are actually homes, livelihoods, and a school for many families. A journalist I met said, "In Palestine, your problem is everyone's problem. You're never alone here."

On the last day, we reached the hypnotic beauty of the desert, its extensiveness and the uninterrupted subtle shades of rock and sand that stretch away from the eye. It is here that the ugly solidness of the concrete wall seemed at its most surreal, cutting through this wondrous landscape. What lay behind the huge metal door in front of me? Within minutes a car pulled up and a couple of local Palestinians invited us to their house in Al-Ramadin for coffee. We sat on mattresses in an otherwise bare room drinking gritty coffee and mint tea while Salman explained how the wall had changed the lives of the villagers in Ramadin. "Life before the construction of the wall was beautiful.

We lived in peace, and earning a living was easier; but when the wall was built, mobility became difficult and life became like living in a closed prison. There is also harassment by the occupation forces; for example, they demolish our homes and forbid us from rebuilding them." The house looks straight out onto the wall, and behind it we could see the new Israeli settlement of comfortable, detached houses and green gardens illegally built on Palestinian land.

I was sad to leave Palestine and the people I was even more in love with. It's a place where I could truly feel free because I felt safer than I have ever felt travelling as a lone woman. I'm looking forward to returning with my two young children to see the bloom of spring and to give them a chance to learn about the important values that the Palestinians can teach the rest of the world. Thank you, Palestine!

Article photos are courtesy of the author.

Louise Brown, a peace activist who has a special interest in Palestine, uses sport to highlight human rights injustices. She is an English teacher and has a radio program that explores the experiences of women living in a new country. She currently lives in Catalunya with her two young children.

In September 2018, I cycled 700 kilometers in Palestine, through towns, cities, and countryside, following the barrier built by the Israeli security forces and condemned by the United Nations and many other organizations and countries. For Palestine, it is an apartheid wall, whereas Israel and its supporters call it a security barrier. Internationally it is often called just The Wall. I wanted to see and experience the effect of living close to the wall, but nothing prepared me for the constant arbitrary injustices that the Palestinians are faced with in their everyday lives. For two weeks, I saw at firsthand how the amazing strength of the Palestinian spirit and resistance helps them cope with living under such stressful and frustrating circumstances.

Qalandia checkpoint.

